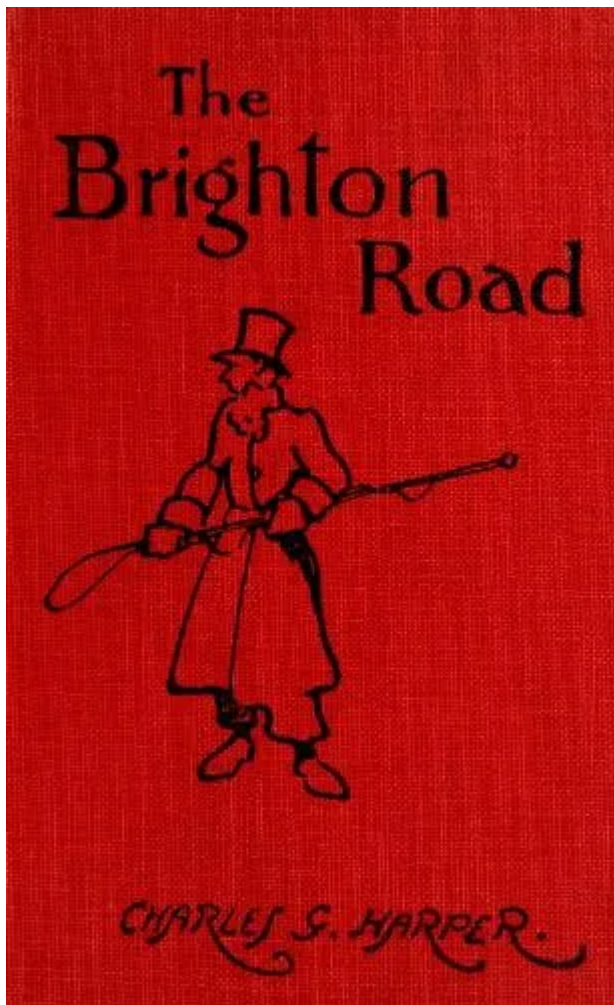


# Little Hell



200 years ago on maps of the road from London to Brighton was a mark representing a coaching house or inn known as “Little Hell”.

An irreverent punkie place. A house of ill repute. A dive bar!

Years later the grandson of the woman who ran “Little Hell” went out to North America to make his fortune in the Goldrush or at the racetrack or in some manner. History gets a bit hazy sometimes. Anyway, the grandson returned from America having made himself rich somehow in California.

On the site of his grandmother’s establishment “Little Hell” (not “Little Nell”. I don’t know what made Charles Dickens choose that name. Probably from “Death Knell”) the grandson built a new coaching house and called it the “California Hotel”.  
“Hotel”, not “hot ‘ell”.

Soon, a railway line was built connecting London with Epsom racecourse and a railway station was built next to the California Hotel and, over time, houses and businesses began to be located around the immediate area until it formed a small village. Once established as the village of “California Station” the possibility of changing the name was considered and, eventually, the name “Belmont” was chosen.

“Belmont” not “Hell mount” and not “Death Bell” or “Death Knell”. Let’s be clear about that.

Belmont is where I grew up. It’s a perfectly respectable small village on the side of the North Downs, a little way south of the town of Sutton. Let’s be clear about that.

There were, in those days when I was growing up, not one but two entirely separate mental hospitals in the area. The Belmont hospital and the Banstead hospital. Why our local area was to be so blessed as to have two separate mental hospitals I cannot say.

My dad had been a boiler stoker in the merchant navy before the war and so he was able to find employment as a stoker in the Belmont Hospital boiler room. On my birth certificate it states “Father’s employment: Steam Boiler Stoker”. Steam punks would be green with envy, probably.

Some of the places where I played as a child are not there anymore. The house and the entire street where we lived was demolished in 1969 as part of the expansion of Greater London. Farmers’ fields had blocks of flats built on them. The road to Belmont mental hospital is now called “Homeland Drive”. Some kind of sick irony since they destroyed our home to make way for someone else’s.



THE “COCK,” SUTTON 1789.  
*From an aquatint after Rowlandson.*

“Sutton for mutton”; so ran the old-time rhyme. The reason of that ancient repute is found in the downs in whose lap the place is situated; those thymy downs that afforded such splendid pasturage for sheep. Sutton Common is gone, enclosed in 1810, but the downs remain; and yet that rhyme has lost its reason, and Sutton is no longer celebrated for anything above its fellow towns. Even the famous “Cock” is gone—that old coaching-inn kept by the ex-pugilist, “Gentleman Jackson.” Long threatened, it was at last demolished in 1898, and with the old house went the equally famous sign that straddled across the road. The similar sign of the “Greyhound” still remains; the last relic of narrower streets and times more spacious.

Leaving Sutton “town,” as we call it nowadays, the road proceeds to climb steadily uphill to the modern suburb of “Belmont,” where stands an old, but very well cared-for, milestone setting forth that it is distant “XIII. miles from the Standard in Cornhill, London, 1745,” from the Royal Exchange the same distance, and from Whitehall twelve miles and a half. The neighbourhood is now particularly respectable, but I grieve to say that the spot is marked on the maps of 1796 as “Little Hell,” which seems to indicate that the character of the people living in the three houses apparently then standing here would not bear close inspection. With the “Angel” placed at one end, and this vestibule into Inferno situated at the other, Sutton seems to have been accorded exceptional privileges.

“Cold Blow,” which succeeds to Little Hell, is a tremendous transition, and well deserves its name, perched as it is on the shivery, bare, and windy heights that lead to Burgh Heath and Banstead Downs “famous,” says an annotated map of 1716, “for its wholesome Air, once prescribed by Physicians as the Patients’ last refuge.” The feudal-looking wrought-iron gates newly built beside the road here, surmounted by a gorgeous shield of arms crested with a helmet and enveloped in mantling, form the entrance to Nork Park, the seat of one of the Colman family, who have mustered very strongly in Surrey of late years.

[Pg 158]

[Pg 159]

[Pg 160]

In my early years I was considered extremely bright, learning to read even before attending primary school. Between the the age of five and ten years I was continually told by the little old ladies who taught at the village school that I would easily pass the “Eleven Plus”, which was the the big exam everybody was nervous about. I would pass it, they told me, because I was the brightest boy in school. They sort of “twinned” me with the slowest boy in school, a

lad almost completely illiterate and innumerate, who was called Andrew. They sat us next to each other in class and encouraged Andrew to ask me for help whenever he got 'stuck'. I was happy with this arrangement because it made me feel important and useful to be helping somebody.

Meanwhile I was given a bit of speech therapy to get over a nervous stutter and to correct my "bad habit" of copying the Canadian way my dad spoke, which the little old ladies considered an "Americanism". I was forbidden to pronounce Gloucestershire and Worcestershire in the way they are spelled. They were to be Gloss-ter-sheer and Woos-ter-sheer thenceforward.

I was also getting treatment described in the 1950s as "sun ray lamp treatment" which was intended to help with my pigeon-chestedness and bad posture, though it never did. The main effect of the regular ritual of being taken to the hospital and made to lay under the sun ray lamp was to amplify my sense of inadequacy and sub-standardness. I was made to feel like some sort of freak in a science experiment. One day when I was laying on the treatment table with the sun ray lamp irradiating my chest I overheard an attendant say "that'll never be right" and I took it to heart. I felt sure he was talking about my weak little chest.

The speech therapy was much more effective and the teachers took a positive delight in my new talents at reading aloud with confidence. Combining my new verbal skills with my mathematical ones enabled me to rattle off the times tables faster and faster, like an auctioneer. The 12 times table, the 13 times table and so on up to any number of multiplication table they requested. I was on fire. I was a wizard. A prodigy. The Eleven Plus loomed closer and I was the only one given sufficient reason by way of the teachers' encouragement to feel that I was going to grammar school. Andrew continued to ask me for help and I continued to happily coach him in reading, writing and arithmetic.

After school hours I loved riding my bicycle, roller skating, climbing trees, playing football and cricket and all the games of childhood. I also had an unhappy knack for falling off my roller skates, crashing the bike into brick walls, falling out of trees and so on and so forth, landing myself in the casualty wing of the hospital time and time again. I had stitches in my head several times. My clumsiness was matched by my enthusiasm, my enthusiasm by my courage and my courage by my recklessness. In fact I had a scar on my face from an accident where I was running with some glass and fell on it face first at the age of 4 or 5. I had friends all up and down Shanklin Road, where we lived. It was a Surrey County Council prefab estate and we loved it. We lived in pre-fabricated bungalows made of aluminium and asbestos. The interior fittings were aluminium metal covered in lead-based paint. I cut my teeth chewing on those lead painted aluminium cupboards in those asbestos-lined rooms. It was a two-bedroomed dwelling with my parents in one bedroom and all the kids (me and two of my three sisters) sharing the other bedroom. Very cramped and uncomfortable. We were lucky the third sister was already grown-up.

My dad continued to work as a stoker on shifts and also had a part-time job as a gardener and my mum worked as a domestic cleaner. They were both good cooks and managed to share the responsibility between them for cooking meals and being around when we came

home from school. I suppose they were very progressive in that way. An equal partnership of a man and a woman who both work, both cook and both bring up the kids. I'm proud of them for it, though I don't think they were actually trying to be progressive, it just happened that way.

I was mad keen on religion and went to Sunday School each week. My parents had no interest in religion but they let me go there and took, I suppose, some pride in my achievements when I got a certificate for bible study and that sort of thing. My dad was very sceptical and would challenge my thinking with philosophical arguments which had occurred to him.

"Adam and Eve were supposed to be the only people in the world" said my dad, "and they had two sons, Cain and Able, so then there were four people in the world. Then Cain killed Able so there were only three of them. Then Cain went out and took himself a wife." My dad chuckled, "Now where did the wife come from, son? Where did the wife come from?" Another time dad said: "All the big companies have these mining operations where they take the gold and silver and diamonds and oil out of the ground. They take and take and take and they don't put anything back. What's going to happen when they've taken out everything that's down there? What's gonna be left? Nothing! Just a great big hole in the ground. That's all, a great big nothing."

He also told me that the high and mighty church people were anti-Semitic and looked down upon the Jews (I had not previously been aware of this) and he drew my attention to the irony of the church people with their bible being anti-Semitic since, as my dad put it, "the Jews wrote the bible".

Thus I developed a mind which considered both sides of religion and both sides of most subjects.

The Eleven Plus rolled ever nearer and the teachers continued to tell me I would undoubtedly pass it and go to grammar school. Everybody seemed to agree that going to grammar school would be a good thing, so I had to accept the general body of opinion and go along with it.

The days and months rolled by, the seasons turned, my dad won the prize every year from the council for his front garden. He pottered about in his greenhouse tending tomato plants, or in his shed collecting nails, screws, different types of metal, radio valves etc. All properly categorised and placed in the correct boxes. He pruned his fruit trees, plum and apple and pear and peach. The elderberries grew along the back fence next to the blackberries and the goosegogs, in the farmer's field behind our council estate. The coal was delivered in sacks to the coal shed and we drank Lucozade and lemonade and lime cordial and tea and coffee and milk and tapwater and cola. At Christmas there were presents and puddings and us kids were given the treat of a tiny thimble-like glass of sherry and at Easter there were chocolate Easter eggs. And my dad went to the British Legion and drank Watney's Red Barrel and I "Listened with Mother" on the radio except that my mother was usually out at work or busy. And milkmen delivered the milk in glass bottles and a rag-and-bone man, just like Steptoe, came around and collected old junk on his horse and cart, which they still had in those days.

And my eldest sister was training to be a nurse and the next younger sister was helping out in a coffee bar full of beatniks and teddyboys.

And I went to cubs and learned to grow mustard and cress on a bit of felt and say dib-dib-dib and dob-dob-dob and how to tie a woggle.

And I got good at drawing comical cartoon characters just like the ones in my comic. And all the chimneys in the street had smoke coming out in winter and the thick fogs we got were really smog but we didn't call it that.

And we read the Beano comic and the Dandy and the Beezer and the Eagle and Dan Dare and in summer we played on the North Downs and in the farmer's fields and in the old, ruin air-raid shelters where we weren't supposed to go and that just made it more interesting and exciting.

And we sang carols at Christmas and played with toy soldiers and model cars and board games. And we had rain and sun and good days and bad days and sad days and boring days and dentist appointments and sun ray lamp treatment. And read books. And ate dinner. And played silly games.

And played with chemistry sets. And watched mum making cakes and licked the spoon. And read Superman and Batman comics. And heard Elvis Presley records. And got colds and stomach aches and got well again. And washed behind our ears. And wondered about space ships and time machines and robots and dinosaurs and superheroes and detectives and spies and God and angels.

Eventually, the Eleven Plus arrived, the big day. They re-arranged the seating in class so we would all sit at a separate desk instead of sharing.

Andrew had to sit at the desk in front of me instead of being beside me and we were all told very clearly that we mustn't speak to each other once the test had started or we would be disqualified.

The invigilator wasn't one of our usual teachers but a visiting one. She gave out the exam papers, repeated the instructions, and then told us to start.

I was flying through the test without much difficulty when Andrew turned around and whispered to me that he needed help. I had understood the instruction not to talk so I ignored Andrew's entreaties.

He became more and more insistent, his whispering got louder and his tone more urgent. I continued to ignore him. Then the invigilator announced she was disqualifying both Andrew and me, for talking during the exam, in spite of my protestations of innocence.

So I didn't get to go to grammar school and, instead, I went to a rough old comprehensive school in North Cheam where I was bullied, not only by the other kids, but by the rough old comprehensive teachers, who considered me a swot. Rough old comprehensive teachers

who tried to steer us away from “airy-fairy” things like poetry and art and towards “realistic” studies such as working in factory or becoming cannon fodder.

I was treated as an idiot for asking the teachers stupid questions such as whether it is true that a spaceship travelling faster than the speed of light would go backwards in time.

A teacher once told me in a very stern and serious voice that I was wasting my time reading science fiction books. He said “The world you’re going to grow up into Smith will be the world of WORK! That’s the future! The world of work. Working in a factory as part of the British manufacturing industry. There won’t be any “computers” or “robots” or spaceships going to Mars. That’s all just fantasy and nonsense!”

I knew he was wrong but how can you tell a grown-up teacher that he’s wrong when you’re only a little boy?